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ABSTRACT

To date, most of the scholarly research and critical articles about ethics in journalism have dealt with newspapers and television rather than with radio. To help fill this gap, a study surveyed a segment of the radio news community to determine some of the attitudes, values, and beliefs of news directors concerning ethics in their workplace. Subjects, 66 directors (out of a possible 200) of "all-news" radio stations in the United States, answered a 117-question survey dealing with ethics in broadcast journalism. Results indicated that (1) almost 40% of the stations had adopted formal codes of ethics; (2) 90% of the directors believed radio journalists should follow the guidelines contained in formal codes of ethics; and (3) most of the news directors seemed to subscribe to the "Pure Act Deontology" theory of ethics--circumstances dictate what is right and wrong. (Sixteen notes and three tables of data are included.) (MS)

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The Virtuous All-News Radio Journalist: Perceptions of News Directors

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The Virtuous All-News Radio Journalist: Perceptions of News Directors

Ethics in journalism has been a "hot" topic for media critics in recent years.[1] To date, most of the scholarly research and critical articles about ethics in journalism have dealt with newspapers or television. Radio, an important source of news and information for many people, has either been ignored completely or treated briefly. The purpose of this pilot study was to survey a segment of the radio news community to begin the process of determining some of the attitudes, values and beliefs of news directors concerning ethics in radio journalism.

Most of the recent criticism has focused on an alleged "credibility gap" between journalists and their readers/viewers.[2] Critics and researchers seem to disagree about how severe the problem is, but it is clear that a great many American news consumers believe journalists are not as ethical and fair as they should be.

One explanation for why research studies and critics often contradict each other when dealing with the subject of ethics in journalism is the inherent problem of defining just what is ethical and fair. As in other disciplines, it is difficult to find unanimity of thought, opinion and perspective when it comes to establishing standards of conduct and moral judgments. Actions that some people label as "ethical" are called "unethical" by others. Actions that under certain circumstances are judged "ethical," under other circumstances are judged "unethical."

Subjective judgments and situational ethics abound because journalists are very often forced to make difficult, split-second decisions under extremely trying conditions. There are some traditional theories of ethics that some journalists use to help them in their attempts to decide how to conduct themselves. These include: "Golden Mean," "Categorical Imperative," "Utility," "Veil of Ignorance" and "Self-Determination."[3]

Moderation is the key to the "Golden Mean" theory. Extreme reactions to situations are eliminated and some middle course of action is taken. The "Categorical Imperative" theory stresses what is right for one person or situation is right for all. The "Utility" theory considers what is the greatest

benefit for the greatest number of people. The "Veil of Ignorance" theory emphasizes an extreme equality of treatment for all people and issues. The "Self-Determination" theory is based on the belief that people should not use other people as a means to an end, nor should they allow themselves to be used by others.

Two other broad ethical theories provide guidance for journalists.[4] "Teleology" emphasizes the consequences of an action or decision. The "correct" behavior can either be that which is best for the journalist or that which is best for the greatest number of people. "Deontology" emphasizes the nature of an action or decision. "Pure Rule Deontology" stresses that there are universal rights and wrongs. "Pure Act Deontology" stresses that circumstances must dictate what is right and wrong.

Formal codes of ethics in journalism provide additional guidance and even a few "concrete" rules for journalists. Most of the major codes are rather general, but they do attempt to set some parameters for what is and what is not acceptable behavior for journalists.

The Radio-Television News Directors Association recently revised its code of ethics.[5] The new code, which is much more concise and somewhat more precise than its predecessor, includes the following provisions:

(A) Broadcast journalists will present the source and nature of information in a balanced, accurate and fair manner.

(B) Broadcast journalists will decline gifts or favors which would influence or appear to influence their judgments.

(C) Broadcast journalists will respect the dignity, well-being, privacy and right to a fair trial of the people with whom they deal.

(D)Broadcast journalists will not mislead or deceive people through the misuse of audio, video or reporting techniques.

The RTNDA code of ethics, like all of the other major codes of ethics in journalism, does not contain any specific provisions for penalizing broadcast journalists who violate any of the code guidelines. Voluntary compliance with code guidelines appears to be good, however. According to a study by Vernon Stone, radio and television stations rarely fire anyone for violating ethics codes or standards.[6] Only about 6% of the TV stations and 1% of the radio stations responding to his survey in 1986 reported that a staffer had been fired for ethics violations during the preceding 12 months. Stone posits

that his research indicates that ethics is NOT a major problem in broadcast journalism.

Stone's research is a good illustration of the definition problem and the different theoretical approaches that are involved in the process of deciding what is and what is not ethical in the practice of journalism. Radio and television news directors perceive few ethical problems, but does that mean there really are few problems? Perhaps, as critics and many audience members claim, there are problems, but news directors simply do not JUDGE certain behaviors to be unethical and so perceive no problems.

Just what is ethical behavior and what is unethical behavior? Can definte lines be drawn? Are there at least some universal "rights" and "wrongs?" This study attempted to determine the perceptions of all-news radio news directors regarding these and other questions related to ethics in broadcast journalism.[7]

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. How do radio news directors feel about potential conflicts of interest?
2. How do radio news directors feel about respecting the privacy of individuals?
3. How do radio news directors feel about certain reporting techniques and styles?
4. How do radio news directors feel about certain newscast production techniques and styles?
5. How do radio news directors feel about selected suggestions for improving the ethics of journalists?
6. Are there differences among news directors based on market size?

METHODS

Based on interviews with 25 journalists and journalism educators, a comprehensive literature review and approximately 12 years of professional experience, the authors developed a 117-question survey dealing with ethics in broadcast journalism. The survey was pre-tested with 12 local radio and television news directors and journalism educators. Some minor revisions in wording and question order were made as a result of the pre-test.

In June, 1987, surveys were sent to 200 news directors of "all news" radio stations in the United States.[8] The results reported in this paper are based on the responses of 66 news directors.[9]

FINDINGS

Codes/Issues

About 39% of the stations had adopted a formal code of ethics. About 38% of the large-market stations, 38% of the medium-market stations and 44% of the small-market stations followed formal codes.(X^2=.17943, ns)

A station or company code was the most often adopted(35%). The RTNDA code was adopted by 27%, followed by a network code(23%) and the Society of Professional Journalists code(8%).

About 90% of the news directors said radio journalists should follow the guidelines contained in formal codes of ethics. The news directors listed the following advantages of adopting formal codes of ethics:[10]

1. Provides standards for staffers, especially new staffers(71%)
2. Improves the ethics of staffers(39%)
3. Improves the social responsibility of staffers(24%)
4. Reduces unethical behavior by staffers(20%)
5. Improves credibility and public trust(6%)

The news directors also listed the following disadvantages of adopting formal codes of ethics:

1. Inhibits flexibility(46%)
2. Guidelines too vague and general(27%)
3. Removes individual judgment(26%)
4. Creates potential legal problems(2%)[11]

Discussions about ethics are not part of the daily routine in most all-news radio newsrooms. Only 2% of the news directors indicated they had daily conversations with staffers about ethics-related matters. About 42% said they discussed ethics at least once a week. About 17% said they discussed ethics at least once a month. About 23% said they rarely discussed ethics with staffers and 16% said they never discussed ethics. There were no statistically significant differences among large, medium or small stations; however, small-market news directors tended to discuss ethics more regularly than did large- or medium-market news directors.[12]

Invasion of privacy was the most often discussed ethical issue(32%). Conflicts of interest was the second most popular topic of discussion(28%), followed by sensationalizing stories(18%) and being fair and accurate(18%).[13] While there were no statistically significant differences among the comparison groups, privacy tended to be discussed much more often in small-market station newsrooms than in large- and medium-market station newsrooms.[14]

Conflicts of Interest

About 65% of the news directors thought at least some "freebies" were acceptable. **(SEE TABLE 1)** Free tickets or passes to report on news and sports events were judged the most acceptable freebies, but free food and non-alcoholic beverages at both news and non-news events were judged acceptable by approximately half of the news directors. Alcoholic beverages at news and sports events, special discounts of any type, outright gifts of merchandise and trips for other than news-related purposes were judged the least acceptable freebies.

About 95% of the news directors thought at least some "moonlighting opportunities" were acceptable. **(SEE TABLE 2)** Jobs not related to journalism were judged the most acceptable, but sports announcing for a co-owned television station, out-of-market commercials and journalism-related jobs also were seen as generally acceptable. Local commercials by reporters and news announcers or public relations activities for profit-making organizations were judged the least acceptable second jobs.

About 97% of the news directors said it was okay for radio journalists to be members of community groups and organizations. (SEE TABLE 3) Almost two-thirds of the news directors even thought it was acceptable for a radio journalist to serve as an officer of a group or organization. About 59% said it was okay for staffers to enter journalism contests sponsored by non-journalistic organizations. All of the news directors thought it was acceptable for staffers to enter contests sponsored by journalism-related organizations. Finally, about 38% of the news directors thought the self-interests of radio journalists too often affected the reporting of radio news.

Invasion of Privacy

About 74% of the news directors said radio journalists should NOT intrude on a person's "private grief" in times of tragedy. About 77% thought public persons do not have as much right to privacy as do private persons; however, about 70% said the private lives of public people should only be reported when it is clear that the developments/actions affect the public.

About 70% thought hidden microphones should NOT be used to gather news. About 52% said "ambush interviews" should NOT be conducted. About 68% reported that reading memos or looking through folders in a news source's office without permission was NOT acceptable. About 95% said rape victims should NOT be named. All of the news directors said the names of accident victims should NOT be released until the families of the victims have been notified. About 79% said suicides should NOT be reported unless public people are involved. About 68% of the news directors thought there should be NO restrictions on who or what can be recorded in a courtroom.

Reporting Techniques/Styles

About 86% of the news directors thought it was acceptable for radio reporters to go "undercover" to gather news. About 83% thought paying sources for information was NOT acceptable. About 29% said "going live" just for the sake of "going live" was okay. About 83% believed radio journalists should "pool" equipment when asked to do so by news sources.

About 92% said it was inappropriate for radio journalists to play such "dirty tricks" on competitors as unplugging microphone cords, sabotaging equipment, etc. About 33% said it was okay to violate traffic laws when in "hot pursuit" of a story. About 60% thought radio journalists should try to assist the victims involved in news events whenever possible.

About 97% of the news directors thought it was okay to grant confidentiality to sources. About 60% said stories that contain quotes from unnamed sources should NOT air unless reporters divulge the names of such sources to the news director or newscast producer. About 35% of the news directors believed there was too much anonymous attribution used in radio journalism.

Newscast Production Techniques/Styles

About 38% of the news directors thought there was too much emphasis on sex, crime and violence in radio journalism. About 37% believed there was too much emphasis on "fluff" and feature stories. About 20% thought there was too much emphasis on actualities and natural sound. About 78% thought that too often radio news stories do NOT provide enough background information to help people understand the meaning and significance of events and issues.

About 50% of the news directors thought radio journalists should edit or clean-up profane language used by sources. About 36% believed factual mistakes made by sources should be corrected or edited. About 24% said grammar mistakes made by sources should be corrected or edited.

About 43% of the news directors said that in reports of dangerous or illegal stunts, the names of the "daredevils" should NOT be aired. About 18% thought that in reports of acts of terrorism, the names and affiliations of the people who commit such acts should NOT be aired.

Improving Ethics

About 24% of the news directors believed radio journalists should have to take a prescribed course of academic study and be licensed before being allowed to practice their craft. About 33% thought the RTNDA or some other journalistic organization should have the power to fine, censure, suspend or sanction in some way radio journalists who violate accepted standards of ethics.

DISCUSSION

The all-news radio news directors who took part in this study are clearly concerned about ethics in broadcast journalism. Almost 40% had adopted formal codes of ethics and 90% believed radio journalists should follow the guidelines contained in formal codes of ethics.

Although all of the major theories of ethics had their supporters, most of the news directors seemed to subscribe to the "Pure Act Deontology" theory of ethics--circumstances dictate what is right and wrong. For example, 65% of the news directors reported that at least some freebies were acceptable and about 95% reported that at least some moonlighting opportunities were acceptable. Almost half of the news directors were concerned about the loss of flexibility and individual judgment that sometimes occurs when a station adopts a formal code of ethics. Many of the news directors even qualified their responses to survey questions with one or more of the following comments: "most of the time," "depends on circumstances," "generally," "must judge on a case-by-case basis," "each situation different," "hard to generalize."

Despite the reluctance of all-news radio news directors to identify any true "absolutes" in the area of ethics, some definite patterns emerged from the study. Perhaps some lines can be drawn between what is and what is not appropriate behavior for radio journalists.

The following behaviors were judged generally acceptable:

(1)Using free tickets/passes to cover legitimate news/sports events and sampling the free food and non-alcoholic beverages provided at such events.

(2)Moonlighting at non-journalism-related jobs or announcing sports for a co-owned television station.

(3)Belonging to and holding office in community groups.

(4)Entering contests sponsored by journalism-related organizations.

(5)Reporting on the private lives of public people.

(6)Waiting to air the names of accident victims until their families have been notified.

(7)Going "undercover" to gather news.

(8)Granting confidentiality to sources.

(9)"Pooling" equipment when asked to do so by official sources.

The following behaviors were judged generally unacceptable:

(1)Taking free trips for personal pleasure.

(2)Accepting gifts of more than nominal value.

(3)Taking advantage of discounts on prices, admissions or memberships that are not offered to the general public.

(4)Consuming alcoholic beverages when reporting on news/sports events.

(5)Narrating or acting in local commercials(especially for reporters and news announcers).

(6)Performing part-time public relations work for profit-making organizations.

(7)Intruding on the private grief of people during times of tragedy.

(8)Airing the names of rape victims.

(9)Airing stories about suicides unless a public person is involved.

(10)Paying sources for information.

(11)Going "live" when there is no real reason to do so.

(12)Using hidden microphones to gather news.

(13)Playing "dirty tricks" on competitors.

(14)Requiring prospective radio journalists to have a license before they are allowed to practice their craft.

There were very few statistically significant differences among large-, medium- and small-market stations. There was a tendency for small-market news directors to be a bit more tolerant of certain types of freebies and moonlighting opportunities. One explanation for this could be the relatively low salaries paid in radio journalism, especially in small markets.[15]

Some caution should be exercised in any attempt to generalize the findings of this pilot study to the total population of radio news directors in the United States. The respondents in this study are reasonably representative of news directors at all-news radio stations; however, it is likely that they have stronger feelings about ethics than do non-respondents and they might be different from news directors at music-oriented stations.

This study is part of an on-going examination of ethics in journalism. Part of the motivation for the effort is the hope that if reasonable, practical, enforceable guidelines for journalistic codes of ethics can be developed, journalists will be more likely to follow such guidelines.[16] If that happens and the public is made aware that there are such guidelines, perhaps the ethics of journalists will improve and with the improvement will come increased public confidence in and appreciation of journalism and journalists.

NOTES/REFERENCES

[1]Isaacs, Norman E., "Meeting the Barbed-Wire Frontier," Nieman Reports, (Summer, 1982), pp. 54-56; Michener, James A., "On Integrity in Journalism," U.S. News & World Report, (May 4, 1981), pp. 80,79; Marks, Jeffrey, "What About Public Trust?" RTNDA Communicator, (February, 1986), p. 9; Stein, M.L., "Press Comes Under Attack at SPJ,SDX Convention," Editor & Publisher, (November 26, 1983), pp. 14-15.

[2]Alter, Jonathan, et.al., "The Media in the Dock," Newsweek, (October 22, 1984), pp. 66-72; Henry, William A., et.al., "Journalism Under Fire," Time, (December 12, 1983), pp. 76-93; Newspaper Credibility: Building Reader Trust, (Washington: ASNE, 1985); pp. 5-62; Relating to Readers in the '80s, (Washington; ASNE, 1984), pp. 7-44.

[3]Dominick, Joseph R., The Dynamics of Mass Communication, (New York: Random House, 1987), pp. 409-411.

[4]Lambeth, Edmund B., Committed Journalism, (Bloomington: Indiana Universtiy Press, 1986), pp. 12-26.

[5]"Code of Broadcast News Ethics: Radio-Television News Directors Association," RTNDA Communicator, (October, 1987), p. 4.

[6]Stone, Vernon A., "Few Firings for Ethical Problems, RTNDA Communicator, (August, 1986), p. 9.

[7]The sample was limited to all-news radio stations for two major reasons:
(1)It was thought that there was a greater likelihood that such stations would be actively engaged in gathering and reporting news.
(2)It was thought that such stations would have large enough staffs to warrant the adoption or consideration of formal ethics guidelines.

[8]The random sample was selected from stations listed as "all news" in the 1986 Broadcasting Yearbook.

[9]The return rate was 33%. When broken down by market size, there was a statistically significant difference in response rate. Large-market stations(1-50) had a response rate of 24%(22 of 92). Medium-market stations(51-100) had a response rate of 37%(21 of 57). Small-market stations(101+) had a response rate of 45%(23 of 51). $X^2=7.193$, df=2, $p<.05$.

10Reponses to the open-end question were content analyzed into distinct categories by the authors. Intercoder reliability was 96%. Scott, William A., "Reliability of Content Analysis: The Case of Nominal Scale Coding," Public Opinion Quarterly, (Fall, 1955), pp. 321-325.

11Intercoder reliability was 94%. See NOTE 10.

12About 50% of the large-market and medium-market news directors reported they rarely or never discussed ethics with staffers; however, only about 27% of small-market news directors reported so few ethics-related discussions. X2=9.7105, df=8, ns

13Intercoder reliability was 94%. See NOTE 10.

14Almost 50% of the small-market news directors listed privacy as the most common ethical issue discussed; however, only about 25% of the large- and medium-market news directors mentioned privacy concerns. X^2=19.2349, df=12, ns

15Stone, Vernon A., "Radio Paces News Salary Gains," RTNDA Communicator, (February, 1987), pp. 8-11. In 1986, the average salary of radio reporters was $263 per week. TV reporters earned an average of $382 per week. Radio news directors averaged $375 per week. TV news directors earned an average of $757 per week. Reporters for small-market radio stations averaged about $201 per week while their news directors averaged $274 per week.

16Bukro, Casey, "The SPJ,SDX Code's Double-Edged Sword: Accountability, Credibility," Journal of Mass Media Ethics, (Fall/Winter, 1985-86), pp. 10-13; Christians, Clifford, "Enforcing Media Codes," Journal of Mass Media Ethics, (Fall/Winter, 1985-86), pp. 14-21. Record, Phil, " A Code of Ethics Ought to Pinch," Quill, (October, 1984), p. 23; Wulfemeyer, K. Tim, "Ethics in Sports Journalism: Tightening Up the Code," Journal of Mass Media Ethics, (Fall/Winter, 1985-86), pp. 57-67.

TABLE 1

"Acceptable" Freebies in Percent by Market Size

FREEBIE	ALL (66)	LG (22)	MED (21)	SM (23)
Freebies in general	65	68	62	65
Tickets to news/sports events	65	73	62	61
Food at news/sports events	59	64	52	61
Beverages at news/sports events	56	73	52	44
Food at non-news events	52	59	43	52
Beverages at non-news events	49	59	43	44
Tickets to non-news events	30	36	14	39
Booze at non-news events	27	41	24	17
Trips to news/sports events	26	18	19	39
Booze at news/sports events	17	18	14	17
Discounts on admissions/merchandise	11	5	5	22
Gifts	6	9	5	4
Trips to non-news events	6	9	0	9

TABLE 2

"Acceptable" Moonlighting Opportunities in Percent by Market Size

MOONLIGHTING OPPORTUNITY	ALL (66)	LG (22)	MED (21)	SM (23)
Moonlighting in general	95	95	95	96
Non-Journalism-Related Jobs	91	91	96	87
Sports Announcing for Co-Owned TV Station	68	81	67	57
"Out-of-Market" Commercials	55	55	62	48
Journalism-Related Jobs	53	65	62	35
Sports Announcing for a Non-Co-Owned TV Station	42	52	48	26
Public Relations for a Non-Profit Organization	42	38	52	35
Local Commercials by Weathercasters	29	28	19	39
Local Commercials by Sportscasters	28	29	19	35
Public Relations for Profit-Making Organizations	19	19	14	22
Local Commercials by Reporters	17	19	5	26
Local Commercials by Anchorpersons	17	19	5	26

TABLE 3

News Directors' Agreement with Statements in Percent by Market Size

STATEMENT	ALL (66)	LG (22)	MED (21)	SM (23)
CONFLICTS OF INTEREST				
Memberships In Community Groups Okay	97	100	90	100
Holding Office In Community Groups Okay	64	77	62	52
Non-Journalist-Sponsored Contests Okay	59	62	52	61
Journalist-Sponsored Contests Okay	100	100	100	100
Self-Interests Too Often Affect News Content	38	18	43	52*
INVASION OF PRIVACY				
Journalists Should NOT Intrude on Private Grief	74	77	76	70
Public People Have Fewer Privacy Rights	77	82	81	70
Private Life Should Be Reported Only If Relevant	70	68	81	61
Hidden Microphone Should NOT Be Used	70	64	76	70
"Ambush Interviews" Are NOT Okay	52	43	65	48
Reading Memos Without Okay Is NOT Okay	68	59	80	65
Rape Victims Should NOT Be Named	95	91	95	100
No Names of Victims Unless Families Notified	100	100	100	100
No Suicides Unless Public Person Involved	79	68	86	83
No Restrictions On What Is Recorded In Court	68	57	81	65

TABLE 3(continued)

STATEMENT	ALL	LG	MED	SM
REPORTING TECHNIQUES/STYLES				
Going Undercover Is Okay	86	91	86	82
"Checkbook Journalism" Is NOT Okay	83	77	95	77
Going "live" For Its Own Sake Is Okay	29	41	19	26
"Pooling" Equipment Should Be Done When Asked	83	91	86	74
No "Dirty Tricks" On Competitors	92	96	90	91
Violating Traffic Laws Is Okay	33	27	29	44
Victims Should Be Helped Whenever Possible	60	47	57	74
Granting Confidentiality Is Okay	97	96	95	100
News Executive Must Know Name of Source	60	50	62	68
Excessive Anonymous Attribution in Radio News	35	33	43	30
NEWSCAST PRODUCTION TECHNIQUES/STYLES				
Too Much Sensationalism In Radio News	38	41	38	35
Too Much "Fluff" In Radio News	37	46	40	26
Actualities/Natural Sound Emphasized Too Much	20	14	33	13
Not Enough Background Information Provided	78	76	90	70
Profane Language Should Be Cleaned Up	50	55	52	44
Factual Mistakes By Sources Should Be Corrected	36	20	47	39
Grammar Mistakes By Sources Should Be Corrected	24	18	24	30
Names Of "Daredevils" Should NOT Air	43	27	55	48
Names Of Terrorists Should NOT Air	18	14	14	26
IMPROVING ETHICS				
Academic Program/License Should Be Required	24	9	33	30
Code Violaters Should Be Punished	33	27	33	39